



RICHMOND TIMES DISPATCH "SERIOUS BOOK TURNS COMEDIC ONSTAGE"

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Barbara Ehrenreich's 2001 book "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America" was an eye-opening exposé of the lives of minimum-wage workers after the welfare reforms of the mid-1990s. Journalist Ehrenreich went undercover for three one-month stints in various low-wage jobs to see if it was possible to feed, house and clothe herself on what she made. Working as a waitress, a hotel-room cleaner, a member of a housecleaning team, a dietary aide at a nursing home and a clerk at a big-box store (there are that many jobs because it took more than one at a time to come close to making her rent), she found it impossible to get by as the single person she pretended to be. And her co-workers with kids to support were that much more desperate.

Dramatist Joan Holden adapted the book for her 2002 play, which works mostly as a rueful comedy. It has multiple roles that are meant to be played by six actors, but in Sycamore Rouge's ironically curtailed production there are just five (except for a sixth, uncredited person who comes onstage as an extra once in a while).

The spare production directed by Natasha Lee Martin moves along well on the sleek Keith Saine set, well lit by R. Jon Shelley. Martin accents all the right notes -- the anti-management rants, the anti-upper-middle class grumbles, the warm bonds formed between struggling workers -- but eventually the play just runs out of gas.

Holden's play has less impact than Ehrenreich's book; going for the laugh makes for fun theater but tends to dissipate the message. So we get amusing nursing-home residents and caricatured short-order cooks punctuated by the occasional audience-discomfiting statement, such as "Our whole lives are subsidized by the working poor."

H. Lynn Smith plays the leading role of Barbara with the right spirit but a disappointing lack of line mastery and insufficient projection for the large room at Sycamore Rouge. We know that the room can be mastered because her castmates Adamna Oneydike and Kirsten Riiber do it with seeming effortlessness.

Like the other actors, Logan Connor and Jennifer Catton, they undertake several roles apiece, and they all do well in creating distinctive characters for each one. But Riiber's Holly -- the newly pregnant leader of a housecleaning team -- is particularly poignant and real, and Oneydike is most affecting as a single mother on the team who's left her young children home alone because there is no day-care option for them.

There's a message here, all right, and it's a significant one. The effort to make it cuter and more palatable with comedy makes it appeal to a broader audience, but to get Ehrenreich's full argument, you need to read the book.